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AUTHOR Bell, David; Reed, Stan
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ABSTRACT

Dr. Bessie Boehm Moore has been a major contributor to library advancement and economics education in Arkansas and throughout the United States. She began her career as a first grade teacher at the age of 14. As one of the first county supervisors in Arkansas, she became alarmed at the paucity of library materials available for student use and succeeded in obtaining county government funds for the purchase of library books. Dr. Moore served on the Arkansas Library Commission for 38 years. As the state supervisor for elementary education, she became committed to economics education. She has been awarded numerous honors, including Arkansas Woman of the Year and honorary Doctor of Laws. (LP)

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Bessie the Builder, Queen Bessie: Profile of Bessie Boehm Moore 1984

David Bell, Director

Teacher Education

Arkansas College

Batesville, Arkansas 72501

Office: (501) 793-9813, ext. 211

Home: (501) 793-5679

Stan Reed, Professor of Education

Arkansas College

Batesville, Arkansas 72501

Office: (501) 793-9813, ext. 217

Home: (501) 793-7784

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Cavid Bell is a specialist in elementary education and children's literature.

Stan Reed is a specialist in economic education and reading.

Bessie the Builder, Queen Bessie:
Profile of Bessie Boehm Moore

This article delineates the background and contributions of Dr. Bessie Boehm Moore to library advancement and to economic education advancement in the state and nation.

Bessie the Builder, Queen Bessie: Profile of Bessie Boehm Moore

"Pioneer, visionary, driver, demanding the best while giving even better....enthusiasm, persuasion, tact, and perseverance to accomplish...knows where to push all the sensitive buttons at any hour of the day or night--and does...knew where the strengths of education and business lay and solidified them..." These were some of the tributes to Dr. Bessie B. Moore upon her retirement from the Arkansas State Council on Economic Education in 1979. These comments are typical of her lifetime contribution to education.

Born in Owensboro, KY, Bessie at the age of twelve moved with her family to the Ozark community of Mt. View, Arkansas. Mt. View is in Stone County, then the poorest county in the poorest state in the nation.

Her interest in education began at an early age. After passing a test which qualified her for a grade one teaching certificate, Bessie entered the teaching profession at age fourteen as a teacher in a one-room school house in St. James, Arkansas. Concerned about her youthful appearance; she wore her hair up, purchased a pair of high heeled shoes to increase her stature, and dressed to appear as mature as possible. When questioned about her age by one of the board members, she added two years informing him she was sixteen years of age.

After ten years as a classroom teacher she became one of the first county supervisors in the state (Jefferson County). As a county supervisor she discovered the paucity of library books available for student use. Alarmed at this situation, she approached the county government for funds with which to purchase library books. Unknown to

Bessie was the fact that the county judge had other ideas for the use of funds. At the next quorum court the county judge who chairs this court removed all the chairs from the room except those needed to seat the officials. At the beginning of the meeting, he asked that the room he cleared of all those standing. As Bessie started from the room, one of the officials extended his knee saying, "I'm game if you are." Bessie sat on his knee. Another official asked that Bessie be allowed to speak. Subsequently, some money was voted for books for the children of the county. This establishing of the first county library in Arkansas began more than five decades of service to advancement of libraries for the county, state, and nation.

Bessie served on the Arkansas Library Commission thirty-eight years, twenty as chair, under nine governors. George Fisher sketched the accompanying caricature as she worked to get the state library building. Even today she is awaiting confirmation in the Senate of her fifth presidential appointment to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science.

In 1934 she was appointed the supervisor of Nursery Schools in the Arkansas Department of Education making her the "father" of early childhood education in Arkansas. Her interests broadened to elementary education when she served as city supervisor of elementary education in North Little Rock, Arkansas, from 1939-1944.

Her service in education was interrupted for over a decade. She entered private business with her husband as owners and operators of a popular cafeteria in downtown Little Rock. Upon his death in 1958 Bessie began to search for new challenges in education.

Returning to education as state supervisor in elementary education allowed her to see the great need for economic education. Bessie became so committed to implementing economic education that she convened businessmen from across the state and explained the need and the plan. She then locked the door in good humor until the requested amount was on the table.

Uniting the business and the education communities became another of her accomplishments through the Arkansas State Council on Economic Education formed in 1962 with Bessie as the executive director from 1962-1979. Under her energetic leadership many teachers in the state were retrained (including her own work at the University of Connecticut) and today all elementary teachers in the state must receive training in economic education to become certified. Bessie's success in this area is best exemplified by economic education national awards competition. Beginning in the early 1960's Arkansas has always had at least one of the five first place awards for economic education in the nation and has captured from twenty-five to thirty-three percent of these national awards annually. The Board of Trustees of the University of Arkansas in 1978 named the Center for Economic Education the Bessie Boehm Moore Center for Economic Education in her honor. The Joint Council on Economic Education of New York recently awarded Dr. Moore the National Distinguished Service award at its annual meeting.

The level of her contributions can be understood by a sampling of the honors she has garnered over the years. At age twenty-four she was a member of the National Committee for Sesquicentennial Celebration of the United States...she was elected in 1952 by popular vote in a state wide newspaper poll to the honor of Arkansas Woman of the Year...she received the C. E. Palmer Distinguished Service Award in 1959, an award given to

the citizen of Arkansas who is judged to have given the finest service to the state the preceding year. (She is the only woman to receive this award. Other winners include the late Governor Winthrop Rockefeller and Senator J. William Fulbright.)...she was chairman of the Ozark Folk Cultural Center Commission in 1963 resulting in the building and operation of the only folk center of its kind in the nation at Mountain View, Arkansas...she was a member of the Board of Directors of the First National Bank of Little Rock (1971-79)...she was awarded the Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree in 1958 by the University of Arkansas and the Honorary Doctor of Laws Degree in 1977 by the University of Arizona...she is one of five honorary members of the University of Michigan Library School Alumni Association...she lectures at the University of Michigan (annually since 1974), the University of Nebraska, Florida State University, the University of Arizona, and the University of South Florida...

Dr. Moore's greatest accomplishment may be the fact that she sees anyone she meets as a human being of great value whatever the level of responsibility that person has been asked to assume.

REFERENCE NOTES

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